

THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

BIRTH

About 25 centuries ago in the Himalayan foothills in the southern Nepal the Awakened One was born to the royal family of King Suddhodāna (Pure-meal) and queen Māyā (Magical-power), the latter dying through childbirth. His personal name was Siddhattha (Attained-objective) and family name Gotama (Best-cow). He was predicted to become a universal king or a great religious leader.

YOUTH

He lived comfortably with fame and fortune, but was deeply concerned about life and death, losing his arrogance in youth, health and life. He felt compassion for worms being cut by the farmer's spades and insects being picked up by birds' beaks. He thus found himself getting into deep meditation already in his childhood.

RENUNCIATION

Even after marriage and having his son Rāhula and even with opposition of his family, Siddhattha could not stop renouncing his secular life to solve the problem of life and death. At twenty-nine he left his home and lived as a religious striver and truth seeker. The king Bimbisāra of Magadha, a neighboring country to Kosala to which his kingdom was subject, offered him military power and financial support. He rejected power of "punishing rods and swords," and chose truth and goodness.

STRIVING

He visited Ālara Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta and soon mastered their state of meditation stages. Finding them not yielding peace, wisdom and complete awakening, he left them and applied himself to hard practice of breath control, fasting, sometime reducing meal to one rice grain a day, and so forth at Uruvela. Finding mortification to the point of extreme exhaustion, not conducive to peace and awakening, he chose middle way of penance and pleasure. Thanks to a village girl Sujāta's milk porridge, he summoned up his last power to enter into profound meditation under the *assatha* tree, later named the Bodhi (Awakening) tree.

AWAKENING

After striving in purifying path and conquering karma of self delusion and selfish desires in peaceful profound meditation, he was awakened in the Dharma of all dharmas, Norm of all forms, that is, Dependent Co-origination on causes and conditions. In the illumination toward dawn he attained awakening (*bodhi*) and unconditioned peace (*nibbāna*, windlessness, of karma). He enjoyed this complete calm, clear and free state becoming truth and peace like tree for many weeks. He was reluctant to go into the world to share it, seeing the people deeply sinking under the layer of karma (delusion, divisiveness, desire) and the state too difficult to realize it. However, he was moved by the universal truth (contributed to the Brahma's beseech) to share it for fear of the destruction of the world and with aspiration for the salvation of it.

TURNING DHAMMA-WHEEL

He chose the previous co-practitioners in the Deer Park as the first candidates for understanding and attainment, as the previous teachers had already passed away. Succeeding in making them realize the Dharma and getting Yasa and his friends (4 and then 50) as his followers there, he went back to Uruvela and converted three Kassapa brothers, Uruvela Kassapa, Nadī Kassapa, Gayā Kassapa, and their 1,000 (500, 300, 200 respectively) followers. At Mt. Gayasīsa, Elephant-head, he gave the sermon to these new converts, former fire ritualists that the world is on fire, our senses are on fire. He further went to Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha, and converted king Bimbisāra. Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna, and some 250 followers headed by them who were once the followers of Sañjaya, a famous skeptic. These two later became distinguished among disciples but passed away before the Buddha.

Years after awakening he returned to his native town, Kapilavatthu and converted his son Rāhula, his half-brother Nanda, his cousin Ānanda who later became his constant attendant, Upāli, Aniruddha and others. He went to Sāvatti, the capital of Kosala and converted King Pasenadi and many others. He visited these two capital cities often.

LAST JOURNEY

For forty-five years after his awakening, he was always together with all beings at the lowest level as itinerant striver only with three pieces of cloths and one begging bowl in peace, truth and joy, even when he did not get food in his bowl. At the age

of eighty, he went on his last journey to Kusināra. While he was passing the season at Beluvagāma, Bamboo Village, he became seriously sick and to the request of Ānanda for the last sermon he replied that he told everything, nothing to hide like a teacher's grip and no intention of ruling the group.

"I am decaying, adding my age, passing the journey of my life. I grew old to the age of eighty. Like an old cart moving hardly with the help of leather strips, my cart is supported by strips. When, however, the one who has striven, stays in concentration with no characteristics, extinguishing every perception and attached to no characteristics, his body is healthy. Therefore, in this world, make yourself an island to resort and take refuge in yourself and not to others. Make *dhamma* an island to resort and take refuge in *dhamma* and not in others."

Then he continued, "My age ripened. My life is left only a little, I shall leave you. I have resorted to myself. O mendicants, stay in striving, mindfulness, faithfulness to precepts, concentrated with thoughtfulness, and protect your own mind. The one who strives for this *dhamma* and *vinaya* (discipline) will attain termination of sufferings, discarding the mutation of this life."

He, however, could survive that rainy season. One fine summer day he took rest in the shadow of a tree after alms round, he expressed his heart,

"Pleasing is Vesali! Pleasing was the old Udena tree! Pleasing was the old Gotamaka tree! Pleasing was..." and uttered, "Beautiful is the world and sweet is life!"

On leaving Vesali he turned around "like an elephant" to see Vesali, and said to Ānanda, "Ānanda, this will be the last view of Vesali for me. Come, Ānanda, let us go to Banda Village." and with a few people he proceeded to Pava Village, where he was served mushroom by a smith, Chunda, and became ill, and with this illness he further proceeded to Kusināra.

MAHĀ-PARINIBBĀNA

Arriving at the bank of Hirañnavatī he said,

"Come, Ānanda, spread my bed between the Sāla trees for me. Ānanda, I am tired. I want to take a rest."

Thereupon he laid himself on his right side, putting his foot on another, keeping his mind right. To the weeping Ānanda in back of him, he said,

"Stop, Ānanda. Do not grieve. Do not mourn. Haven't I told you thus -we must depart from the beloved, the liked and be separated from and become different from. There is no reason to desire non-destruction of the born, existing, composed and destroying. You have long served me, Ānanda, The Improving One, with compassionate, helpful, comfortable, pure and immeasurable actions of your body, speech and mind."

A religious wanderer, Subhadda, approached Ānanda for permission of asking a question to the Buddha about the real religious teacher. referring to the then famous leaders, but he was refused by Ānanda thrice, for fear of disturbing the Buddha. The Buddha, however, called him in and said, "Subhadda, I renounced my home for the good (*kusala*) at twenty-nine years of age. Subhadda, I spent some fifty years since my renunciation. I have walked just in the realm of right way (*naya*) and truth (*dhamma*). There is no other 'striver in the path' than this." Subhadda became the last disciple in his life time.

Upon the news of his last moment, disciples gathered around him. He turned to them and said,

"If there are any questions about dhamma, saṅgha, or practice, ask it now."

No one asked. He repeated and said,

"You may not ask for respect. It is not good! Ask as a friend asks another friend. "Ānanda said, "No one seems to have any questions."
"Now, mendicants, I say, all things in the world are impermanent. Strive without indolence. These are my last words."

The Buddha breathed his last in the depth of night. He betook himself to *Mahāparinibbāna*, Great Complete Peace.