

Becoming Buddha

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Whether we are students of Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism, we are all followers of the teachings and the example of Lord Buddha Shakyamuni. All of the most acclaimed and accomplished masters of these traditions – the arhats of the Shravakayana and the Pratyekabuddhayana, the bodhisattvas of the Mahayana, and the yogis of the Vajrayana – are born from the words of Buddha. Because Shakyamuni Buddha is the source of the teachings of all three yanas^[1] and the example of the journey of each stage, it is essential to reflect on his life, especially his early life as Prince Siddhartha and how he began his journey on the spiritual path.

Many details of the Buddha's life are familiar to us by now. We know, for example, that the Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha over twenty-five hundred years ago. We also know that his parents were from the ruling families of two small, neighboring kingdoms in the northern region of India. His father was Shuddhodana, the king of the Shakyas. His mother was Queen Mahamaya, the younger daughter of Queen Lumbini and King Sihanu, who was renowned for her great beauty. The birth of their child, the infant Prince Siddhartha, took place in a magnificent garden called Lumbini, named after the queen's own mother, and was attended by many wondrous signs. According to custom, King Shuddhodana and Queen Mahamaya called upon a sage to request a prophecy for their child. The sage told them, "There are only two possibilities. The child will either become a great emperor – a Chakravartin king – or he will renounce worldly life and become a great sage and master of the spiritual path." Unfortunately a week after Prince Siddhartha was born, his mother passed away. After her death, King Shuddhodana married Mahamaya's sister, Maya. The new queen took over the care of the baby and nourished him throughout his growth. The prince grew up under the care of Queen Maya and many other royal caretakers. His education began at a very young age. He was trained in the five ancient Indian sciences of astrology, medicine, grammar, literature, and the various physical arts and sciences. Prince Siddhartha mastered all these subjects instantly.

King Shuddhodana lavished every imaginable form of material wealth and enjoyment upon his son. Prince Siddhartha lacked for nothing that could please or entertain him. The only thing missing from his life was the experience of suffering and pain. Because of the prophecy, the king lived with the fear that Prince Siddhartha might someday abandon palace life in favor of the spiritual path. Therefore he spared no effort to hide the more unpleasant and troubling aspects of life from his son. The king was very skilled at this. When the prince wanted to go out and tour the country to see how the people lived and what the

world was like, his father would hold him back, saying, "I'll let you know when the time is right." This was because the king had to first set the stage for the prince's outing. He would send out a large crew of people to create a pleasant Hollywood-type of stage-set for the prince to see. In this way, Siddhartha would witness only signs of happiness. The people would be throwing flowers, singing and dancing in the streets. In this the king was very successful. He created an amazing stage-set wherever the prince went. Everything looked liked it came from Universal Studios: very beautiful in front, but if you looked in back, there was nothing. Not only were there no real buildings, there was also no real happiness either. It was only a splendid facade of happiness, of joy, of pleasure. That was the way Prince Siddhartha toured the city. However, due to his previous aspirations, he came across a few people who were not supposed to be in the story. Sometimes this happens – people who are not supposed to be part of the show will climb up on the stage and into the spotlight.

On one occasion when he was touring the city in a chariot, the prince happened to see something he had never seen before – an aged and decrepit man. However, because he had never seen old age, he did not recognize what it was. So he asked his friend, the charioteer, what it was he was looking at, and his friend answered, "This is called old age. This is an old man." The prince asked, "Does this happen to everyone?" and his friend answered, "Yes, unfortunately, it happens to everyone." Surprised, the prince asked, "Even for kings and princes?" And his friend said, "Yes, there are no exceptions, I'm sorry to inform you." This aroused the prince's curiosity. In this way the prince came upon the first of the "four signs," or "four sights," by which he recognized the suffering of existence.

On a second occasion, he saw a person afflicted by disease, and there followed the same questions and the same answers. On a third occasion, he saw a corpse, being borne by a funeral procession, and the prince again asked the same questions and received the same answers. Finally, on the fourth occasion, he saw a yogi, a meditator. When the prince asked his questions this time, the charioteer answered, "This person is called a *sunnyasin*, or *rishi*, a highly skilled practitioner of the dharma. He has renounced the world and is trying to overcome old age, sickness and death – the three things you saw previously." So the prince asked, "Is that possible?" And his friend answered, "This person believes that it is possible, but only by following the spiritual path."

From the life story of the Buddha, we learn that people twenty-five hundred years ago did their best to ignore suffering just as we do today, only in a slightly different way. We do not try to hide suffering and pain quite as literally as the king did at that time, patching up everything, putting up new walls and curtains and so forth. However, some things are similar. Just like the king, we try to push suffering out of sight. We try to make it invisible in our cities, in our universities, and throughout our whole environment. Whenever we see suffering, we try to

isolate it, to keep it limited to a certain area, and then we give it a nice name. In fact there are many similarities between the life of Prince Siddhartha and our own lives today.

THE WISDOM OF NOT KNOWING

For all the many pleasures and distractions Prince Siddhartha's life afforded him, in his heart he felt that there was always something lacking. He was searching for something without knowing what he was seeking. However, his encounters with old age, sickness, death, and the renunciant led him to a turning point in his life and the beginning of his path to enlightenment.

This point in Siddhartha's life is an important teaching and example for all of us. Did he enter the spiritual path because of his strong faith in religion, deep devotion to a god, or keen interest in philosophical views? No, these were not the causes for his journey to enlightenment. His journey to enlightenment began with the simple, heartfelt desire to know the truth. Prince Siddhartha was earnest and highly inquisitive. It was natural for him to look deeply at his experience and search for genuine knowledge. Through honest reflection he recognized that he did not know the truth. Thus he did not set out on the path with any answers. He did not make any pronouncements. He began his quest by asking questions: "What is this? What is going on?" He acknowledged what was new to him and what he did not understand. That is how Buddha's journey began.

To understand that we do not know something is to possess great wisdom. We often have a wrong understanding of wisdom. We think it means knowing everything, and we do not want to admit to not knowing, so we pretend that we do even when we do not. We might even begin all of our encounters with new things that way, but as our life goes on, the make-believe does too, and it eventually affects our spiritual path. In contrast, genuine wisdom is knowing what we do not know; it is also seeing what is going wrong, although we may not always immediately see how to make it right.

When we have an inquisitive mind and ask questions, we will get answers, but they will not always be the correct ones. In fact these answers do not have to be perfectly correct. If we are looking for the "right" answer now, at the beginning of our path, we will not find it. From the Buddha's point of view, we will never find the right answer until we attain enlightenment. It is certainly not going to be available to us at the beginning of our path. It is something we will obtain only at the end. Our problem is that when we look for and think we have the answer at the beginning, there is no more journey. We get stuck because we hold a wrong understanding of wisdom.

Therefore wisdom is not only knowing what we do not know, it is also learning

from our mistakes. If we got everything right the first time we tried, the world would be a very different place. As my teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, always says, “Erring and erring, I walk down the unerring path.” When he says this, he is showing us that it is only when we make mistakes and then recognize them that can we correct our errors and find the right path. On the other hand, if we fail to recognize our mistakes because we are only focused on having the “right” answer, we will never be able to find the correct path, the unerring path. Therefore when you see the mistakes you have made, when you see your mental afflictions and ego-clinging kicking in, when you see your mind not knowing something clearly, that is having great wisdom – if you can use that as path. That is the greatest wisdom possible – the wisdom that established Prince Siddhartha on his path to enlightenment.

Having recognized that all his luxuries and pleasures could not bring genuine happiness, contentment, or freedom from suffering, Prince Siddhartha renounced his royal life and escaped into the jungle to pursue the spiritual path. There he took his prince’s sword and cut off his hair. He removed all his ornaments and put on the saffron robes of a monk. At that time there were many monks living in the area, and he joined a group of them. Eventually, after succeeding in his initial meditation practices, he decided to go further into his path. He next adopted the path of asceticism that was followed by many Hindu yogis of that time. These practices were physically arduous and extreme attempts to purify one’s karma and attain salvation from the stream of cyclic existence. Siddhartha undertook these practices for six years, subsisting only on a few grains of rice and water on the banks of the Naranjana River outside Bodhgaya.

When he entered this phase of his journey, he believed that asceticism was the right answer, and he began with absolute commitment to that path. He did not say, “Well, I’ll just give it a shot.” No, that is not how he began. Rather, he said to himself, “I want to pursue this because I want to find the end of suffering, the end of samsara. This is my journey.” However, he realized later on that although asceticism had some value and that he had learned something from it, it was ultimately not the right path – the path that would lead him to enlightenment. So he abandoned the path of asceticism and accepted an offering of food from a village woman. Prince Siddhartha gradually regained his health and strength and continued to practice near Gaya in the jungle.

From then on he walked down the path of the Middle Way, falling neither into the extreme of asceticism nor into the extreme of hedonism, which he had experienced during his life in the palace. Did Prince Siddhartha find that Middle Way right from the beginning? No, he started with something else. However, his journey eventually led him to the right path, the Middle Way, and finally to his seat under the bodhi tree and the achievement of great enlightenment. He arose from that seat not as Prince Siddhartha but as the Buddha, the Awakened One.

THE VALUE OF DOUBT

In the same way, our own journey must begin with sincere and honest questions – not questions that will make us feel smart or look better – but genuine questions coming from our heart, from our desire to know the truth. From the perspective of Buddhist spirituality, the primary ground for the journey to enlightenment is this genuine heart of inquisitiveness, which also involves doubt and skepticism. It is good to have doubt. There is nothing wrong with doubt and skepticism. According to the Buddhist view, they are an expression of wisdom. If we have no doubt, no skepticism, if we merely accept everything that is thrown at us, then where is our wisdom? Where have our questions gone?

This questioning mind is good for the spiritual journey so long as we can, at some point, arrive at an answer. Then doubt and skepticism become good qualities. However, if we cannot reach that level of satisfaction or resolution, then these same qualities become very negative. If we doubt everything, like a “doubting Thomas,” then we can even go crazy or become paranoid. Nothing productive or positive can result from that. On the other hand, if our doubt leads us to further analysis and examination, which then brings us to some conclusion, then that doubt has been very useful for our path. The negative aspect of doubt is like a run-on sentence, where we write and write and cannot find any place to put a period. At some point we must find a place where we can put our period and come to a full stop. Not only is it exhausting and irritating to write run-on sentences, but it is also exhausting and irritating to read them.

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[1] The Buddhist path is traditionally classified into three styles or stages of practice called “yanas” or “vehicles.” The classification of Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana is the most commonly used. However, classically speaking, the first two of the three yanas are the Shravakayana and the Pratyekabuddhayana, which are the two Hinayana vehicles leading to the fruition of “arhatship,” the attainment of nirvana, or peace, for oneself. The third yana is the Bodhisattvayana, which is the vehicle of the Mahayana that leads to the enlightenment of buddhahood. This vehicle is distinguished by the compassionate motivation to bring all sentient beings, not just oneself, to the state of enlightenment. The Vajrayana is seen as part of the Mahayana; while its methods are different, it leads to the same goal.

