

Who Was the Buddha?

The word "Buddha" means "Awakened" or "Enlightened." It does not mean a particular individual, but a state of human perfection. In the past there have been many Fully Enlightened Ones, or Buddhas, and there will be more in the future too, but their appearance is rare. The most recent Buddha was born Siddhattha Gotama, a prince of the Sakyan Clan in Northern India. His birthplace was at Lumbini, in modern Nepal, close to the Indian border. His father's palace was at Kapilavatthu on the Indian side of the border.

As a young man he was deeply moved by the suffering of human existence. Though he was happily married with a new-born son, at the age of twenty-nine he renounced his luxurious life to search for liberation from suffering. He practiced asceticism for six years before deciding that fasting and self-mortification were of no use. After taking normal meals to regain his strength, he attained enlightenment at the age of thirty-five by sitting the whole night with the resolute determination not to rise from his seat until enlightenment was reached. Thereby he became the Buddha — the Awakened One.

For the remaining forty-five years of his life he wandered throughout Northern India, teaching the Dhamma that he had realized, and gathering many disciples from all social classes. At the age of eighty he passed away and was not reborn again anywhere. The Buddha is not in heaven looking after his faithful followers, and he has not gone anywhere. A fire that ceases to burn has not gone anywhere, it has just gone out. The Buddha's final passing away is called his parinibbāna. This expression can be applied only to Buddhas, Pacceka Buddhas, and Arahants, since it means the complete cessation of suffering without any remainder. An Arahant is a disciple of the Buddha who has attained enlightenment by following his teaching. A Pacceka Buddha also gains enlightenment by his own efforts and, like an Arahant, is fully liberated from suffering, but he lacks the total perfection of a Fully Enlightened One who has unique abilities to teach others.

The enlightenment of a Buddha is always the same, no matter in which era he is born. Enlightenment is the realization of the four noble truths: the truth that life is suffering, that the cause of suffering is craving, that the cessation of craving — nibbāna — is the cessation of suffering, and that the only way to nibbāna is the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right thought, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

A Buddha is not a god, nor a messenger of God, but a human being. He has no power to save anyone from suffering, except by teaching them the Dhamma. Living beings can save themselves only if they follow the Buddha's advice and gain insight knowledge by their own efforts. Though the Buddha had many supernatural powers, he relied mostly on instruction, and prohibited his disciples from exhibiting psychic powers. Psychic powers are a product of deep concentration, but for liberation from suffering only insight knowledge is essential. The Buddha's psychic powers enabled him to know a person's past lives, spiritual potential, and present thoughts, so he was extremely skilful in guiding and instructing others in the Dhamma. On some occasions he did not teach the Dhamma to certain individuals because he knew that they were not yet ready to understand it. On other occasions, when disciples were unable to make progress in meditation, the Buddha used his psychic powers in

various ways to inspire them in their practice, but in every case they had to gain the realization of Dhamma for themselves.

The Buddha was also subject to the law of kamma. On several occasions he had to endure illness, injury, hardship, and abuse as a result of previous bad kamma. However, his mind was unaffected and he bore such hardships with perfect equanimity. Though a Buddha can be injured by someone with a strong malicious intent, it is impossible for any living being to kill a Buddha. He will only die when his natural life-span comes to an end. If a disciple asks him to, a Buddha can extend his natural life-span to a certain extent by using his powers of concentration, but in the absence of such a request a Buddha will die at the end of his natural life-span, since he has no attachment to existence at all. When suffering from a disease, the Buddha could recover his health more quickly by the use of suitable medicine, or by listening to the recitation of the Dhamma by a disciple.

The Buddha never acted or spoke without clear awareness, or without any purpose. Even when he smiled, his personal attendant, Venerable Ānanda, knew that there was some reason for it. On being asked by Venerable Ānanda the reason for his smiling the Buddha would usually tell a story of a previous life relating to the place they were passing. Venerable Ānanda would remember such discourses perfectly and relate them to other disciples on suitable occasions.

The speech of the Buddha was without defect. There are six kinds of speech:

1. True, beneficial, and pleasing to others. This speech the Buddha used on many occasions.
2. True, beneficial, but not pleasing to others. This speech the Buddha used whenever it was necessary to correct those who were deviating from the path.
3. True, not beneficial, but pleasing to others. This speech the Buddha did not use.
4. True, not beneficial, and not pleasing to others. This speech the Buddha did not use.
5. False, not beneficial, but pleasing to others. This speech the Buddha did not use.
6. False, not beneficial, and not pleasing to others. This speech the Buddha did not use.

False speech is never beneficial in the ultimate sense, though one may gain worldly benefits from lying. Thus there are only six types of speech altogether.

The Buddha had fully developed all knowledge and wisdom. Whatever he wished to know he could realize immediately, just by turning his attention to it. Even in his last days, though his physical health was deteriorating, there was no change in the clarity of his memory or the sharpness of his intellect. Some of his disciples surpassed him in longevity, health, etc., and they sometimes received offerings when the Buddha did not, but in regard to wisdom and psychic powers no one could surpass him.

He received lavish offerings from kings and millionaires, but never deviated from his simple and austere life style. His daily routine was extraordinarily demanding,

leaving only an hour or two for sleep, but he maintained it throughout most of his forty-five-year mission. He spent a few brief periods in solitude when conditions were unfavorable for preaching the Dhamma.

The Buddha usually traveled by foot, walking great distances with his disciples or sometimes alone to propagate the Dhamma. His disciples traveled alone to convey the Dhamma to distant parts of India, far from the Ganges valley where the Buddha spent most of his life. During the Buddha's lifetime, the communities of monks and nuns flourished. Many ordained and lay disciples attained enlightenment, and some novices as young as seven attained Arahantship. Several kings were devoted followers and supported the Sangha liberally.

At the age of eighty, the Buddha passed away. Ten pagodas (*cetiyas*) were built by devotees from different parts of the Ganges valley to contain the Buddha's relics and the ashes from his funeral pyre. After the Buddha's demise, the Dhamma thrived in India for at least five hundred years. During the time of Emperor Asoka, about three hundred years after the Buddha's passing, it spread to Sri Lanka where it became firmly established, and has remained up to the present day.

Devout Buddhists worship the Buddha and symbols representing him such as bodhi trees, historical sites, Buddha images, and *cetiyas*, but the Buddha discouraged blind devotion. The best way to honor him is to practice his teaching. Admonishing Vakkali, who was slavishly devoted to him, he said, "Whoever sees the Dhamma sees me; whoever does not see the Dhamma, does not see me." (Vakkali Sutta, S.iii.119)

So the right attitude is one of respect, love, and gratitude, rather than false piety, which is akin to superstition and fear.